

Saving

TEXAS HISTORY



The Texas General Land Office
Archives and Records Newsletter

Jerry Patterson, Commissioner
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Long-lost Letters Shed New Light on Texas Navy



A ship from the first Texas Navy was represented on the Republic of Texas \$10 bill. Details include the Texas Navy flag waving. Image courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

The Texas Navy was pressed into service in January 1836—just months before the newborn Republic declared independence from Mexico. By August 1837 all four ships were lost, as was the reputation of the ragtag flotilla of privateers and U.S. Navy veterans.

But correspondence recently pulled from the more than 35 million maps and documents archived at the General Land Office casts new light on the lives of two men seen as pirates by some and heroes of the revolution by others. The letters were found in files containing testimony from men who fought in the Texas Revolution seeking land grants for their service.

“These letters help tell the story of Texas through the personal stories of two men,”

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Texas Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson said. "Documents like these are hidden gems, and with Texas history month upon us, I think they're a great example of why Save Texas History has such an important mission to preserve and digitize the Archives at the General Land Office."

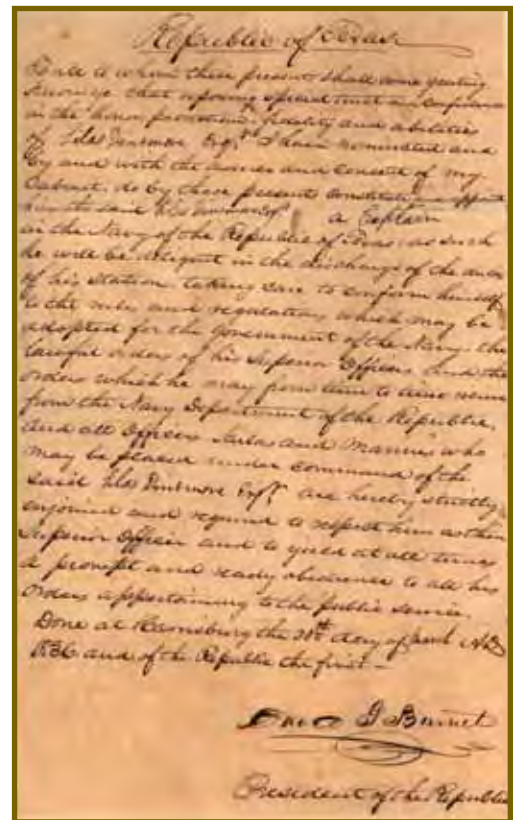
The short history of the first Texas Navy was marked by both success and scandal. The men who signed up to serve on the four ocean-going ships purchased by the provisional government can be credited with protecting supply lines from New Orleans and defending the Texas coast from Mexican invasion. By raiding ships on the Gulf of Mexico, the Texas Navy brought in much needed revenue for the cash-strapped state.

But the Texas Navy also defied Sam Houston's orders, raided a ship belonging to the United Kingdom and caused a diplomatic row that threatened to undermine Texas' early efforts to be recognized as an independent republic. Because of this, Houston denied land grants to Texas Navy veterans. They were the only men who fought for independence not to receive land for their service.

While historians still argue over the relative merits of the first Texas Navy, the letters culled from the General Land Office Archives provide details of both sacrifice and service. Captain Silas Dinsmore, Moses E. Morrell and others provided the details in fruitless attempts to be recognized for their service.



The flag of the first Texas Navy.

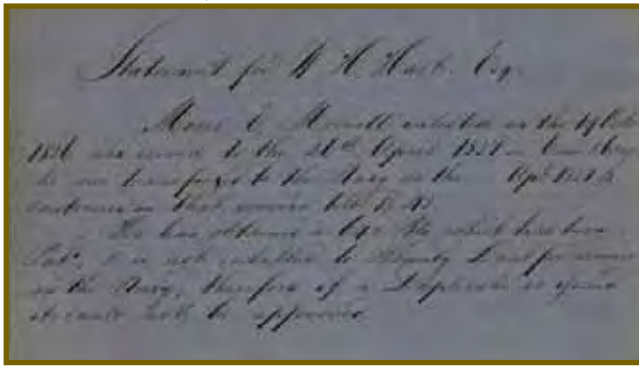


Captain Silas Dinsmore, of the Texas Navy, applied for land for his service. As proof of his service, he turned over his officer's commission as a Captain in the Texas Navy, which was signed by President David G. Burnet on March 30, 1836. Republic Donation Voucher #841.

Dinsmore was a key figure in the establishment of the first Texas Navy. He was one of the first men to be issued letters of marque and reprisal, which legalized the seizure of ships on behalf of Texas. His first order, from Secretary of the Navy Robert Potter in April 1836, was to "collect all the mules and able bodied Negroes" between Matagorda and Lynchess Prairie to "assist in con-

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A document in the Moses E. Morrell Court of Claims file (CC #5930) explaining that Morrell is not eligible to receive bounty land for his Navy service, but is eligible for his Army service.

structing public works” to defend the coast. Dinsmore’s last order, in June 1836, was to gather all able-bodied citizens in Matagorda and lead them against 10,000 Mexican soldiers rumored to be marching against Texas.

Testimony from William Austin on behalf of Dinsmore shows the Captain was a “zealous and efficient soldier” who volunteered for the Army in 1835 and joined the Navy in 1836. “In the way of forwarding Volunteers and supplies to The Army, he was a very zealous and industrious man,” Austin said. Dinsmore didn’t get any land for his service in the Navy, but was awarded 1,280 acres for his service in the Army.

Testimony in Morrell’s file contains details about life aboard the *Invincible*, as well as the scrape he found himself in after he survived the sinking of the last ship of the first Texas Navy.

Morrell was aboard the *Invincible* as the Mexican Navy attacked it and the *Brutus*. The two ships were attempting to return to Galveston, heavily laden with Mexican booty after a two-month cruise of the Gulf raiding ships against Houston’s orders. The Mexicans took both ships, putting an end to the first Texas Navy.

“After cruising for months, living on the spoils of the enemy, green turtle, and beans we sailed for the harbor of Galveston,” Morrell testified. “On our arrival the tide being low and the *Invincible* being encumbered with plunder taken from the enemy, could not cross the bar.”

As Mexican warships bore down on the *Invincible*, Morrell tells how the *Brutus*’ crew ran her aground in their rush to aid the *Invincible*. Realizing they were on their own, Morrell writes “all hands was called in our craft and the resolution formed of resisting (though 39 in number) to the last.” Two by two, the men slipped off the boat and safely made it to shore, however.

Once on shore, Morrell wasn’t safe. A drunken sailor speared him through both thighs as Morrell leaned against a tent. The attacker, drunk from liquor brought ashore from the *Brutus*, was shot dead as punishment. Morrell was left to endure primitive medical care for his wounds, which tormented him for the rest of his life.

“Having no medical aid, I was ordered to the Houston Hospital here without any nourishment, lying under a tree for a month (the Hospital being full) with shavings for a pallet and sticks for a pillow,” he writes. Morrell earned 640 acres for his service in the Texas Army, but was forced to sell the land certificate to feed himself while he was in the hospital.



The Republic of Texas \$10 bill. Image courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

His application for a land grant for his service in the Navy was denied.

“Documents like these letters provide important details on how the men who created Texas thought and felt,” Patterson said. “If you’re interested in Texas history, then you should be interested in helping save these documents and Save Texas History.” ✨

The Denial of a Sailor's Bounty

by James Harkins

Land and promised in advance of military service—known as a bounty—was an established American tradition before the Texas Revolution. With vast expanses of land at their disposal, Republic of Texas founders bolstered recruitment to their cause through generous offers of land for service. But not all Texas veterans were treated equally. Veterans of the Texas Navy, due to political chicanery and tricks of logic, were excluded from the generous land-granting policies.

Texas passed its first bounty act on November 24, 1835, when the general council created a regular army and promised 640 acres to those who served for two years. After the revolution, the Texas government generously distributed public lands, especially to veterans. In all, 9,874,262 acres were granted to Texas army veterans, and later, Confederate soldiers in Texas. Not one of those nearly 10 million acres was granted for naval service under the Republic, despite the importance of naval actions during the revolution. “The fact remains that Texas could not have won her independence and maintained it as she did, without the navy,” wrote Texas Navy historian Alex Dienst.

It has been said that shipping lanes from New Orleans were the umbilical cord that kept the rebellion alive during its embryonic months. The Texas Navy was vital to the war effort, with approximately three-fourths of all troops, supplies and cash originating from New Orleans. It was seen as nearly impossible for commerce to go through any other channels into Texas, other than by ship, due to the impractical nature of crossing Louisiana swamplands, and the Big Thicket of East Texas. Navy vessels prevented Mexican warships from halting shipments to Galveston, keeping the war effort and the fledgling Republic alive.

Military leaders also knew the importance of the Texas coast for winning a revolution, or quashing a rebellion. “... the posts of Texas are not sustainable, whilst a maritime force does not co-operate with the operations of the land service,” Mexican General Vicente Filisola wrote. Commander James Fannin, in an August 1835 letter, wrote that provisions were scarce for the Mexican army on dry land. He requested naval assistance to the army, asking: “Where is your navy?” He pointed out that if Texas ships could block access to ports, “they [the Mexicans] are ruined.”

With the importance of the navy known to commanders and politicians of the day, it seems incomprehensible that political leaders would punish a group so pivotal to Texas independence.

The political battle for bounty lands culminated six years after the revolution, but its roots go back to 1835. Naval policy was one of many points of contention between Sam Houston and Mirabeau Lamar. Lamar favored an aggressive naval policy that encouraged raids around the Gulf of Mexico. Houston wanted the navy to remain close to shore, protecting the vital ports.

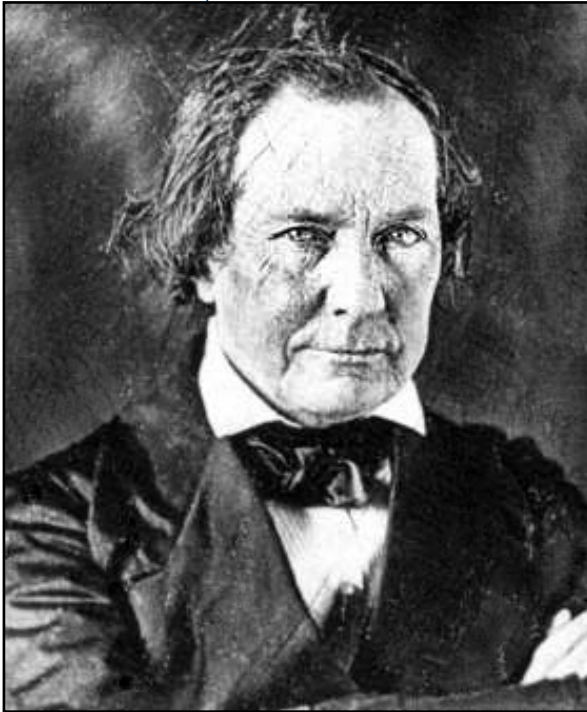
Houston believed peace and prosperity would follow diplomatic recognition from the United States, the United Kingdom and other world powers, along with eventual annexation to the United States. Lamar, however, believed the road to peace and prosperity for Texas must be lined with the graves of Mexican soldiers. These disagreements led to inconsistent policies during the Republic era, as Lamar and Houston traded the presidency back and forth.



President Sam Houston vetoed bounty land for navy veterans in 1842. Image courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

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President Mirabeau Lamar was a strong advocate of the Texas Navy, and a longtime rival of Sam Houston and his policies. Image courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

“the few who survived would deem it valueless, because not one of them would be willing to penetrate the wilderness in quest of a place to locate it ...”

Potter reintroduced a joint resolution on January 25, 1842 that would circumvent Houston’s veto, authorizing the secretary of war and navy to issue certificates of bounty land to sailors and marines of the navy. But Potter’s arguments were fruitless and the issue would never be broached again.

Nevertheless, several navy veterans applied for land, which was originally promised them by Texas Navy recruiters. Among these were Captain Silas Dinsmore, Moses E. Morrell and Benjamin F. Hughes. Dinsmore served on the land in support of the navy, and turned in his appointment documents and orders to the Land Office as proof that he was a legitimate veteran deserving of bounty land. Both Hughes and Morrell turned over letters and testimony about their service aboard the *Independence*, offering eyewitness testimony to the sinking of one of the prized ships of the first Texas Navy. The results of Houston’s policy and the testimony of these brave men and others like them can be found in the archival collection of the General Land Office. ✨

Robert Potter—a senator and one-time secretary of the navy—and Senator James Webb proposed a resolution allowing bounty land for navy veterans on November 4, 1841. It was noted in the November 18, 1841 edition of the *San Augustine Red-Lander* that this “Resolution will meet with much opposition in both Houses, and a warm discussion is expected.” After the resolution was passed, it was presented to President Houston, who vetoed the bill on January 6, 1842.

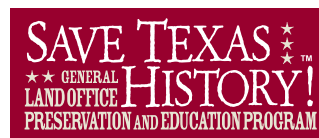
In his veto message, Houston paid tribute to the “exalted Gallantry and distinguished bravery” of the men who fought at sea for the Republic, but he would “not sanction injudicious and unnecessary extravagance” on their behalf. “Generally, the seaman has no interest (except a transitory one) on shore,” Houston said. “The harpies that are generally found in sea-ports, and to whom seamen usually become indebted, are those only who would profit by the bounty and munificence of the Government.”

In perhaps the most hypocritical part of Houston’s veto message, he claimed “sailors who would have claims are either dead or scattered to the winds of heaven.” Army veterans and their heirs were eligible to receive bounty land whether they lived or died. “If bounty land were granted,” Houston added,

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Watch for opportunities to win maps and other Save Texas History collectibles. Give STH a thumbs up to be entered in STH drawings. Keep up with your Save Texas History friends today! ✨



Genealogical Resources at the General Land Office

by James Harkins

When people think of land records, they don't necessarily think of genealogy. However, it's important to remember that the history of land in Texas is the history of Texas and the people who made it. Land Office staff members work hard to inform the public about the genealogical resources at the agency and how to access them for an enjoyable, and hopefully, successful search.

Perhaps the most significant group of records for genealogical research is found within the Spanish Collection. "These records constitute the most valuable collection of original documents for the history of the settlement of Texas during the period 1821-1835, and one of the largest collections for the history of Texas," said noted bibliographer Henry Putney Beers. These documents feature thousands of pages of correspondence detailing the process of bringing families to Texas and settling on the frontier.



The Texas General Land Office Archives and Records provides a state-of-the-art facility for conducting genealogical research with experienced staff to help.

Another important genealogical resource for anyone with ties to the Republic or early statehood eras of Texas are the land grant headrights that are the basis of the Land Office archival collection. These documents can establish a link to the past that paves the way for entry into a specific lineage society. Sometimes found within these documents are

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Attention Texas Teachers



Coming soon to Save Texas History! Resources designed specially for classroom use

The General Land Office is a one-of-a-kind resource for educators to incorporate primary source material into curriculum plans. Based on the historical documents housed in the Land Office Archives, TEKS-coordinated lesson plans include:

- Interactive activities suitable for instant use or for customizing to individual class needs.
- Strategies for developing Texas history, geography, writing and even math skills.
- Links to primary source letters, documents and maps that can be used to create new and engaging lessons for your students.

Created by teachers!

Scheduled for debut this summer, check out the "For Teachers" link at www.savetexashistory.org.

Contact Buck Cole at 512-936-9644 or e-mail buck.cole@glo.texas.gov for more information.

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letters describing places, people and significant historical events that may be of interest.

People of German descent should also consider doing research at the Land Office where almost 3,000 immigration contracts that originated in Germany are housed. "These immigration contracts in Austin are of predominant importance for locating immigrants over here (in Europe), and I suggest that steps be taken to explore this important material," said noted Austrian genealogist Karl Friedrich von Frank.

To Request a Speaker

to discuss Land Office genealogical resources with your group or society, please call 512-463-5277, or e-mail

Archives@glo.texas.gov.

One of the most satisfying moments for genealogical researchers is when documents touched by long-lost family members are found. Land Office researchers can help explain the significance of a specific document as it relates to a researcher. Sometimes, it's possible to find the name of an ancestor on a Land Office county map, which offers a stunning visual of when and where an ancestor came to Texas. Using Land Office GIS technology, researchers can find a particular land grant and correlate its present location to current roads and landmarks. This allows heirs to visit the land their ancestor first called home, and where their Texas journey began.



The GLO Archives and Records contain more than 35 million documents. GLO staff members will help the genealogical researchers find their way through this vast amount of material in hopes of finding the information desired.

For more information about ordering a genealogical name search, please check the "Genealogy at the Land Office" section of the new Land Office website, www.glo.texas.gov. ✱

COZUMEL, TEXAS?

JULY 1837 AND A VISIT TO COZUMEL ... TEXAS?

This week in Texas History, brought to you by this station and the Save Texas History program of the General Land Office.

July 13, 1837. Gulf of Mexico. Seeking to punish Mexico and break a blockade, Secretary of the Texas Navy Samuel R. Fisher has sent schooners *Invincible* and *Brutus* to ransack the Mexican coast.

Coming ashore at Cozumel, Commander H.L. Thompson claims the island in the name of Texas. He fires a 23-gun salute and raises the navy flag as bewildered natives pledge allegiance to the republic.

Sailing on, the Texans plunder Mexican villages and seize thousands of dollars in loot. President Houston, furious at the illegal raid, suspends Fisher and Thompson.

Cozumel became Texan, 171 years ago,
This Week in Texas History.



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